

Video Games Zap Harvard

It's a nagging worry for many parents and teachers whether Pac-Man and his frequently violent pals are extracting something more than quarters from America's youth. But if a space invader had wandered into a Harvard University-sponsored conference called "Video Games and Human Development" last week, he wouldn't have gotten a hint of any fuss. Indeed, the parade of relentlessly upbeat experts created the impression that the only people who might be adversely affected by computerized play are travel agents who book tours to Lourdes. A seven-year-old autistic child spoke for the first time while working with LOGO, said pediatrician turned computer researcher Sylvia Weir. "Video games are the best thing we have going" to help the nation's 2 million chronic mental patients, asserted Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Dr. Steven Leff. As for those seedy-looking arcades that many town fathers suspect of being unlicensed pharmacies ... all they represent, according to juvenile crime expert B. David Brooks, are "social places like the old corner ice-cream parlor ... that help loners come out of their shells."

Several major newspapers reported these conclusions under headlines such as VIDEO GAMES GET BAD RAP, RESEARCHERS FINDING. But it was probably conference coordinator and Harvard librarian Inabeth Miller who won the prize for Most Startling Statement when she insisted that while video-game manufacturer Atari, Inc., had suggested the symposium and paid \$40,000 to finance it, the absence of any antigames spokesperson was completely coincidental.

In the end, the three-day event seemed to be of more interest to the media and the computer industry than to the educational

community. Of the approximately 175 who paid \$150 to attend, only a handful were teachers; the remainder included social scientists, Atari staffers, representatives from the New York City-based Children's Television Workshop and observers from Atari archrival Coleco Industries, Inc. As a result, virtually no eyebrows were raised when Prof. Edna Mitchell of Mills College in Oakland, Calif., announced that having a home game did not interfere with homework—and no one questioned Brooks's finding that game playing rarely led to serious truancy. In fact, it was only after a psychologist praised the games for requiring "inductive skills and parallel processing of information" that a member of the audience was moved to speak. "I think Harvard has gathered all the wisest people in the kingdom to admire the emperor's new clothes," said Doris Mathieson, a high-school administrator from Framingham, Mass.

Losses: Atari was hardly shy about pushing for the conference at a time when it is reporting severe financial losses. "I knew damn well it was to their advantage to do this," admits coordinator Miller. "They really wanted it this spring." The company, operating through an arm known as the Atari Institute for Educational Action Research, also provided Harvard with the names of potential invitees, as well as a supply of press releases which Miller deemed too self-serving to distribute. "This was our conference," she insists. "Sure, I would have been more comfortable if there had been some negative research. I sure as heck tried to find it." Miller adds that Atari did encourage her to present opposing viewpoints.

In her search for skeptics, Miller no doubt overlooked U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, who caused a consider-

able flap last November when he remarked that video games may be hazardous to the mental and physical health of those who become addicted. U.S. Department of Education official Frank Withrow is another doubter. The games may actually lull a student's enthusiasm for computers, Withrow says. Kids accustomed to the fast-paced effects of the arcade games are sometimes turned off when they don't find the same level of excitement in the educational software. What's more, while Donkey Kong may help learning-disabled children, research by neurologists at the Mayo Clinic indicates that the flickering lights of video games may trigger epileptic seizures in light-sensitive individuals.

Effects: Unfortunately, the one-sidedness of the Harvard conference served to undermine the credibility of many worthy observations proffered by researchers who admit that we are just beginning to understand the effects of video games on the human psyche. In the closing hours, the panelists even broached the sensitive question of how poor children will be able to compete with wealthier kids whose parents own Apple II's. "Is this going to be a tool to divide the poor from the rich?" wondered author and educator Herbert Kohl. But that provocative question couldn't erase the feeling in some observers that they had just spent several days playing someone else's game.